HISTORY ON THE WALL

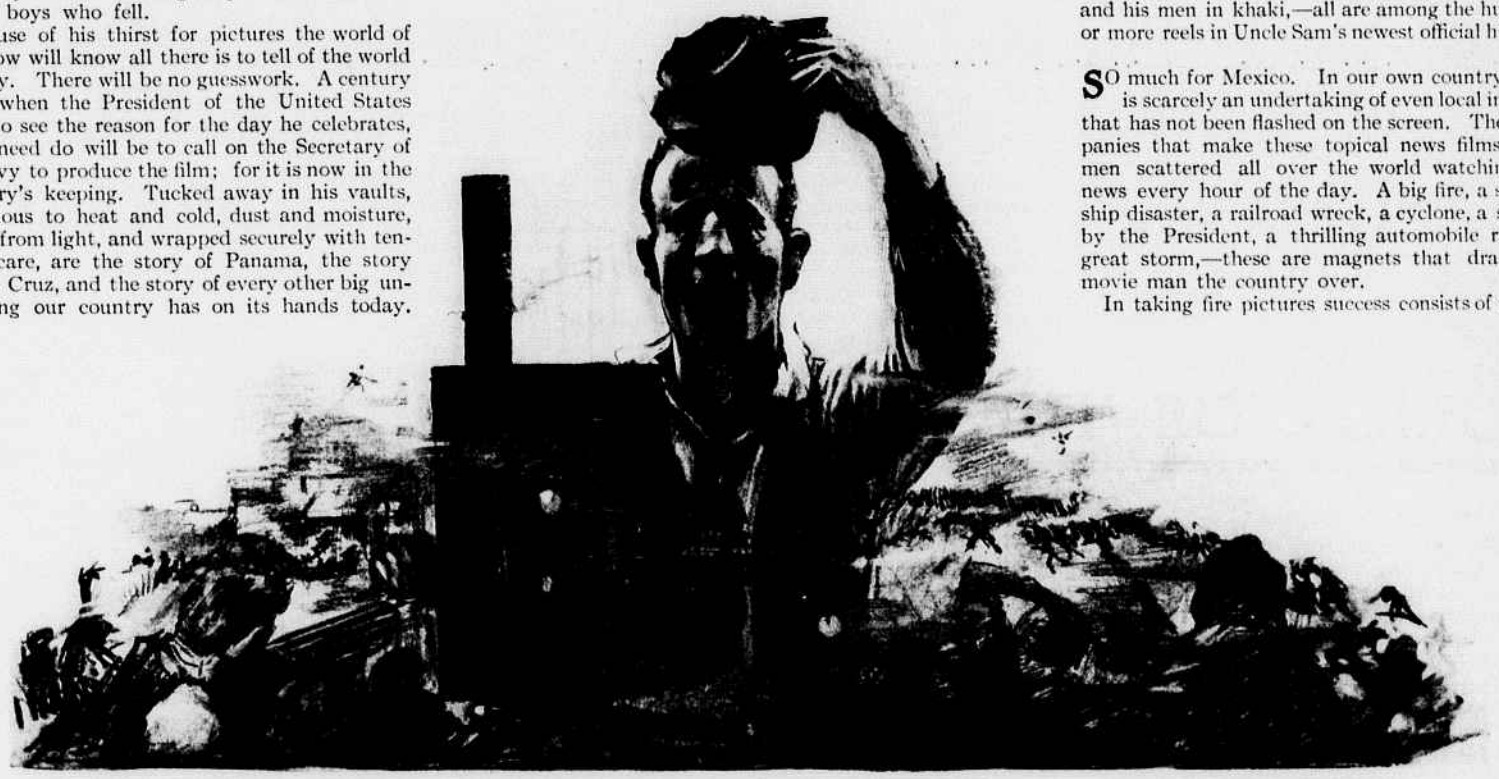
Drawing by Rolf Armstrong

By WILLIAM P. HELM, JR.

YOU'LL find him wherever men are doing big things, and you'll know him by his camera. Generally he is a gentleman; but he isn't finical in his language if you step between his lens and his picture. His business is the business of bottling history, as one would bottle sunshine, were it possible, to be released later, and he tells his story in writing on the wall that all can read. You have seen him. He is the moving picture camera man.

There are several thousand of his tribe in the United States, and if he were mobilized from all over the world there would probably be an army corps of him. He isn't quite fifteen years old, measuring his life by the life of his art; but already he has started to weave a web of celluloid, strand by strand, into a net to bind the centuries together. He was with Scott in the dreary waste of snow that whitens the bottom tip of the world. He is with Stefansson, drifting with the currents of the Arctic Sea. He saw the end of Louvain. His shutters purred a soft accompaniment to the swish of steam shovels burrowing into the mud of Culebra. He caught for ages to come the picture of Fletcher's men at Vera Cruz. He imprisoned on his film the funeral march up Broadway behind the flag-draped caissons bearing the boys who fell.

Because of his thirst for pictures the world of tomorrow will know all there is to tell of the world of today. There will be no guesswork. A century hence, when the President of the United States wants to see the reason for the day he celebrates, all he need do will be to call on the Secretary of the Navy to produce the film; for it is now in the Secretary's keeping. Tucked away in his vaults, impervious to heat and cold, dust and moisture, hidden from light, and wrapped securely with tenderest care, are the story of Panama, the story of Vera Cruz, and the story of every other big undertaking our country has on its hands today.



Today's fleets and tomorrow's armadas will be steered to the scrapheap in time; but the animated story of their making, their glory, and their downfall, will be in the department's vaults. A hundred years hence, or maybe two hundred or three hundred, American Admirals will see them on the screen, complete from the smile of their sponsors to the last wisp of smoke from the big guns that sink them as targets; just as the story of the old Texas of Spanish War fame sunk off the Atlantic Coast not long ago by modern American dreadnoughts is now on file.

The Navy Department has at least three prints, made from different angles, of the launching of each of its battleships. It accumulated tens of thousands of feet of every phase of the department's activity, from the loading of supplies to the flights of its aviators, during the days that followed our occupation of Vera Cruz. The movie men were permitted to take pictures of practically everything they wanted—and they wanted everything they saw—simply on condition that they furnish the department a copy of what they took.

Secretary Daniels wanted the pictures, and went out of his way to make things easy for the movie men. Half a dozen or more of them sailed for Mexico as passengers on United States battleships, a procedure unheard of before. One company that was left out in the cold because it couldn't get a man to Boston in time to board Rear Admiral Winslow's flagship was taken care of at Norfolk. This concern's operator was permitted to take a tug out from Hampton Roads and board the battleship at sea. Once aboard, he was accorded all the privileges shown a commissioned officer.

There was much work for the camera at Vera Cruz. The bombardment of the Naval College by the Prairie's guns was only the beginning. You can see that, if you are fortunate, on the screen at Washington. You can see too, if you obtain official permission, the marines and sailors swarming into the city from their launches; you can see them popping away in the streets at the snipers; and you can see other things that do not appear spectacular, yet make you turn your head.

The mortal bite of a modern bullet does not impel a man to jump into the air and wave his arms; nor does he spin round and crumple up dramatically, as our best movie actors seem to think he does. Death marks its victim quietly and seizes him without display. If the victim be leaning against a barricade, he simply slips forward a few inches; if he is on his feet, he seems to stumble and fall. He lies quite still; and the veteran observer knows that another soldier will never see home again.

OF course he is a daredevil, the movie man, or he wouldn't face the leaden torrent with only a camera. Hardly a camera man who went to Vera Cruz failed to receive his baptism of fire. The camera men who were with Villa, with Pablo Gonzales, with Santos Coy, with the dozen or so Federal leaders who sought to check the advance of the rebels, have turned the crank for whole days to the whine of Mauser bullets and the boom of bursting shells and grenades. They did it for the fun of getting the picture—and fifty dollars a week, or less.

"I was under fire for three days at Torreon," reads a letter from a camera man who had been with the Federals. "Once I took shelter in a box car. I stayed there till a bullet broke my tripod. Then I ran. I fixed up the tripod later and got some street fighting. When I took that I was in a window. I barely had time to get away. As it was the rebels chased me two blocks. I lost some of my film."

When the underbrush blossomed with eager rebels that pressed through the streets foot by foot into the heart of the city, this camera man fled. He wasn't afraid; but he wanted to save his film. He threw away his camera, for it would have hindered him; but he kept all his negatives, and joined the routed Federals in their stampede toward the capital.

"For three days," he wrote, "I had nothing to eat, and no water except what was in puddles in the road. I slept at night in my clothes on the ground; and I got cold, for I didn't have a blanket. Often I was waked up and told to beat it, that the rebels were coming. Believe me, I did beat it! I saved seven thousand feet of film."

He went to Mexico City, stayed there a short time, and then took a train for Vera Cruz, having obtained a relief camera and supplies left behind before starting for Torreon. He thought it best to take his film to Vera Cruz personally, so that there might be no questions as to its reaching the main office, back in the United States. At Vera Cruz a strange thing happened,—when the Americans took the city he fled with the Mexican Federals. Fortunately he was a German. An American would have fared hard just then.

Thus this manufacturer got both sides of the picture. His operator at Vera Cruz got views of the fighting from the American side, and the German operator got views from the Mexican side. The German's pictures reached New York ahead of all other photographs or moving pictures. They were taken from a suburb of Vera Cruz and showed the retreating Mexicans, running away, pausing, reforming, firing back on their pursuers, and again in rout as the Americans came nearer.

All this is on file with the Navy Department. It will keep for many years. Officially the pictures are America's first attempt to write history on the screen.

The story of Vera Cruz would not be complete without the street scenes of the lazy afternoon, the bullfight, and the wretched prison on the waterfront where the sea sweeps at high tide over the floor of the lower cells and political prisoners used to languish and die. So the movie men got all these and sent them home. The manufacturers sent them to Washington. The sailing of troops from Galveston, their arrival at Vera Cruz, the formal ceremony in which Fletcher and his sailors turned the city over to "Fighting Fred" Funston and his men in khaki,—all are among the hundred or more reels in Uncle Sam's newest official history.

SO much for Mexico. In our own country there is scarcely an undertaking of even local interest that has not been flashed on the screen. The companies that make these topical news films have men scattered all over the world watching the news every hour of the day. A big fire, a steamship disaster, a railroad wreck, a cyclone, a speech by the President, a thrilling automobile race, a great storm,—these are magnets that draw the movie man the country over.

In taking fire pictures success consists of ninety per cent. luck and ten per cent. pluck. When St. Augustine, Florida, was visited by a disastrous fire last winter, a movie man was asleep on the second floor of the Munson House. He had come to town a day or two before to take pictures of a motorboat race. His wife was with him. When the fire was discovered it was all he could do to get away from there with his wife and his camera. When his wife was safe he took a picture of the fire.

It was night, and the only light was firelight. He opened the diaphragm of his camera and turned at half the usual speed. He placed his camera so close to the flames that his eyebrows were scorched. He stuck there, and he cranked away, and he got the prettiest fire picture ever seen on the screen in America. The picture, of course, was tinted red (nearly all fire pictures are), and only the flames and faint silhouettes of hurrying crowds were visible. Black night was pictured on the border. Inasmuch as the picture was taken at half speed, it was automatically shown at double speed when thrown on the screen. The stiff wind that fanned the flames became a hurricane on the screen; the quick footsteps and agitation of those who passed before the lens were exaggerated to twice normal, so that the screen seemed a whirl of red flame fringed with a black border, with men and women darting and scurrying and racing here and there along the streets like scared rabbits.

When Salem, Massachusetts, burned, a dozen or more camera men obtained splendid pictures. One movie man, however, left his work for a minute to help rescue an aged man—and lost all his film except several hundred feet. The camera was on a housetop, and the fire